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ABSTRACT

Questions about the implications of the new technologies for literacy, literacy teaching, and literacy practices provoke diverse and contradictory responses in the media, in policy documents, in state and national assessment surveys, and among teachers themselves. On one hand, the need for literacy to be reconceptualized and redefined in the face of rapid change seems overwhelming. On the other, definitions of literacy, particularly as they are enacted in curriculum and assessment policies and in schools, for the most part remain largely print based. A pilot study with four teachers in two secondary schools in Australia explored the implications of the new technologies for literacy and the English curriculum. The focus was on what it might mean to extend the range of texts studied in English to incorporate games, on the nature of computer games as narratives and text, and on changing constructions of literacy as they were reflected in this instance in the planning, teaching, and evaluation of the unit on computer games as texts of the new technologies. Joint planning sessions were held with the teachers. Findings suggest computer games in the classroom do bring "mayhem," not least in the technological, copyright, and classifications (ratings) involved. Yet at the same time, there is also "magic" in the texts themselves in the engagement of many students more commonly bored or marginal with traditional texts and subject matter. (Contains 23 references.) (NKA)

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Magic or Mayhem? New Texts and New Literacies in Technological Times.

by Catherine Beavis

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Magic or Mayhem? New Texts and New Literacies in Technological Times

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Prelude

The title of this session comes from a 1999 computer game, Magic and Mayhem. A highly literary fantasy/problem solving game drawing on myth and narratives ranging from Classical Greek to Arthurian. Initially a perfect choice for a curriculum designed around fantasy and popular culture, the game examplifies what it might means for literacy to be shifting in the direction of design (Kress and van Leeuin 1996. Kress 1995, New London group 1996 et al.). Yet, also characteristically, despite the enthusiasm of teachers workingin the project with which this paper is concerned, the game was ultimatly rejected as a textual choice because of age ratings and attendant fears. - violence, panics, and community apprehensions about the anti-social and anti-literacy nature of games. 'Magic and Mayhem' speaks both to the possibilities and to the disruptiveness of linking literacy and curriculum with computer games.

Computer games and literacy

Questions about the implications of the new technologies for literacy, literacy teaching and literacy practices provoke diverse and contradictory responses in the media, in policy documents, in State and National assessment surveys and amongst teachers themselves. On the one hand, the need for literacy to be reconceptualised and redefined in the face of rapid change seems overwhelming - more a matter of recognition and retrospective adjustment to reflect already established practice and ongoing change. On the other, definitions of literacy, particularly as they are enacted in curriculum and

assessment policies and in schools, for the most part remain largely print based, with the perceived displacement or enlargement of literacy to embrace visual and digital forms often a matter of much contention and debate. The moral and cultural dimensions of these arguments have been well documented, as has the need for teachers to be better supported in working with the new technologies and designing and teaching curriculum that reflects the rapidly changing nature of literacy practices in both in and out of school worlds. (Lo Bianco and Freebody 1997, Lankshear, Bigum et al. 1997, Green 1999, Lankshear, Gee, Noble and Searle 1997)

Bill Green, in the recently published ACSA compilation of Garth Boomer's papers, reminds us of Boomer's vision of curriculum as active and shaping theorised practice, his emphasis on 'notions of design and the practical, and on curriculum as 'composition and event' (Green 1999: 4). With this view of curriculum as grounded theorising, the planning, teaching and reflection upon curriculum units becomes a rich context in which to explore collaboratively changing constucts of literacy in the direction of the digital and design, and a chance to work through what it might mean to incorporate evolving and contentious popular culture forms into the frameworks of existing parameters. In Victoria, English curriculum guidelines envisage already the possibility of extension into electronic texts, so that teachers are licensed to work with such texts to achieve goals linked to the study of texts more generally.

With this view of curriculum as active theorising, and of teachers as the groundbreakers in bringing together 'design' and 'the practical', 'composition and event', Noel Gough and I undertook a pilot study earlier this year with

teachers in two schools to explore the implications of the new technologies for literacy and the English curriculum. Using word of mouth, we sought out Secondary English teachers who might have an interest in working with computer games, as texts of the new technologies, in their mainstream English classroom, and in working collaboratively to design and teach a two week unit on computer games.

Our focus was on what it might mean to extend the range of texts studied in English to incorporate games (consistent with the inclusion of 'everyday' and 'electronic' texts amongst those specified as appropriate for study in the Curriculum and Standards Framework for Victoria), on the nature of computer games as narratives and text, and on changing constructions of

literacy as they were reflected in this instance in the planning, teaching and evaluation of the unit on computer games as texts of the new technologies. In each instance, the teachers were in schools that were already actively reshaping their curriculum to take account of digital technologies. One was an independent school with an established lap top program, the other a networked State school with computer labs regularly utilised by students in most subject areas. to develop and teach a unit of work on computer games. Two of the four English teachers with whom we worked were also teaching Information Technology.

Following the initial contact, one or both of us visited each school for joint planning sessions with the teachers. Once we had described our interest in working with games as texts within the context of expanded literacy, the teachers designed curriculum that would reflect these goals and fit in with their existing text study and curriculum. We attended and in some instances taught classes in both schools during the unit, collected student work, observed and interviewed students. At the conclusion of the unit, we returned for an extended reflection and evaluation session with the teachers, and at one school, with the students as well. We audiotaped and transcribed interviews, classes and discussions, and together with the students' written work, read them for instances of how print and electronic literacies were constructed by teachers and students, for expanded notions of reading, writing and text, and for the pedagogical and textual implications of the teachers' and students' work.

The units

At the State school, we took *Abe's Exoddus*, part of the *Oddworld* series as set text, working with a year 10 class. The advertisement for the game gives some sense of it. It's a game with a well developed context and scenario, with characters, narratives and design elements creating a complex universe within which the story is played. The advertisement exemplifies the intermeshing of visual and verbal elements that contribute to the game's appeal and provides an illustration of what it might mean to redefine literacy in the direction of design. The advertisement, like the game, is a witty, outrageous and sophisticated, addressing a reader well versed in popular fears associated with computer games, but not above the gross. The text is knowing and ironic, both verbally and visually, as for example, in the conspiratorial play with reasons why the Muddokin's cry, and with the

references to the Soul Storm Brew - Muddokins' solace but also deeply troublesome in its source. It sets out both to shock and confront, and to undercut that confrontational quality through alerting the reader to its character as parody or satire. The game was approached as a class text, analagous to the study of novel or film, with movie clips shown to the whole class using data projection, and small groups playing individually in subsequent periods. Their teacher devised a 'Creative Response' task, which utilised familiar approaches to more literary texts in ways that took up also the nature of the game as game.

At the laptop school, we worked t year 8 level with groups of games along a principle similar to wide reading, in relation to students' work around the class novel, *A Wizard of Earthsea*. We brought in games in the same genre (Fantasy) and asked students to play them together in small groups. The ultimate task was to adapt the novel to a computer game. En route, students were required, amongst other things, to present a review, incorporating both print and digital literacy and verbal and visual analysis. The task drew on an amalgamation of traditional print and verbal literacy, as well as building in expectations about graphic and informational technology demands. They were also asked to incorporate headlines, columns and graphics in their work, and to submit it in online form. Their reviews themselves embodied literacy as design, and the simultaneous exploration of operational, cultural and critical dimensions of (digital) literacy (Green 1988, DECS 1996, Lankshear et al. 1997).

Constructions of Literacy

The exploration of how notions of literacy might be expanded towards the digital, and this new literacy integrated in current practice was a central feature of the teachers' work in designing and evaluating these units. The expansion of 'texts' to include computer games was readily embraced. On the other hand, both the teachers and ourselves were very conscious of the ways in which existing literacy assumptions and technologies constrained our capacity to move beyond print and verbal parameters in envisaging possibilities for student response. At the laptop school, early discussion turned on how students might use images rather than words as the basis of their analysis and response, and on the possibilities of creating a new level or new game, using specialist software in the computer design class. The translation of the novel into a game was a 'real world' compromise which attempted to retain some of these features, as was the review, which in one class took the form of a visual presentation and discussion using data projection technology.

With *Abe's Exoddus*, working with year 10 students, the relationship was conceived of differently. We took a deliberately literary approach to the non-literary game to underline the workings of the text as narrative and to highlight continuities between games and other forms - novel and film primarily - in the construction and reading/playing of the game. Students were asked to think of themselves as readers, and the game as story, in their discussion and writing about the game.

The question of how students read games, of what literacy strategies and practices they bring to bear, and on what strategies and practices might be generated in turn, were central issues in the research. Inducting players into how to play is an important component of any game's success. Just as Meek argues about picture books, these texts too must themselves be the ones to 'teach what readers learn'. To do so, movie clips preface the introduction and each level, to provide the narrative context, plot line, motivation and rudimentary characterisation, and to indicate progress made. In addition, print and visual instructions are provided about how characters can move, and about specific dangers, traps and scenarios, with tips for avoiding them. An introductory animated tutorial on screen often guides players with explicit instructions and some 'how to' or 'try out' time. At one remove, printed instructions, often in pamphlet form, may be included in or on the box, while games also rely extensively on advertising and explanations in game magazines and on the web sites of games clubs and software companies. Alongside this, perhaps most effectively of all (in relation to how to play the game) is the existing community of players from whom the new player learns.

The strategies and reading practices students drew on were particularly evident when they were faced with a new game, as they were at the school using games as wide reading texts with analogous experiences. Contrary to popular images, playing games in this situation was intensely social and interactive, with three to four students grouped around a single screen, working the controls, reading the instructions, taking notes of what appeared on screens, trying out solutions, arguing and so on. Much of this was quite traditionally print and writing based, with information provided on screen often itself in verbal form. However, there was not a linear reliance on print or even visual text after the initial attempts to get a feeling for the game. Rather, students seemed to leap off at some point into almost intuitive play, as one of the teachers, Judith, observed:

> I think it was interesting the extent to which print mattered, and the extent to which, when they entered into the game, if they weren't in it

> for the first time, [they needed to] think about deciding what is this world - that's not just *Beyond Time*. There's almost no-one who has played that before and so they watched, there was a little movie clip at the beginning but it got boring and they have a certain amount of tolerance to that and then they watch it for a certain amount, and then they started to try. I think they seemed quite intuitive, they have to be able to just click on things, and there's quite a long interval where you can actually intervene, do anything, but very few of them go to the box to look at the back of the box or anything. That seems very much an adult thing to do.

Magic and Mayhem

Incorporating computer games into the literacy/English classroom has powerful implications for pedagogy as much as literacy, in terms of building links between young people's in and out of school worlds, in developing understandings about reading, reading positions, ideology and critique, and in reframing the English classroom in ways less excluding of many groups. Computer games in the classroom do bring 'mayhem', not least in the technological, copyright and classifications (ratings) involved. Questions of consumption, ideology and identity are foregrounded (Alloway and Gilbert 1998, Gilbert and Gilbert 1998, Nixon 1998, Wark 1994) with, as in much teaching of popular culture, tricky balances to be struck between pleasure and resistance in the reading and teaching of the text (Buckingham 1998, Sefton-Green 1998, Misson 1998) In addition, in this instance in both schools the relative fluency of some students over others with computer games introduced a further complex and potentially troubling disruptions in relation to what it is that students know, and what and how that is valued. Unexpected and paradoxical questions arose for teachers in both schools about how to support students already fluent with print who seemed disoriented and at a disadvantage in this context through their unfamiliarity or clumsiness with digital literacy. Issues of equity and assessment were in many ways turned on their heads, as students normally disengaed in school became highly focussed and involved, while more print oriented, literary students were for the moment marginalised if they could not also operate in this visual, digital world.

Yet at the same time, there is also 'magic', in the texts themselves, in the engagement of many students more commonly bored or marginal with traditional texts and subject matter, and in the opportunities offered to both teachers and students to explore in serious, scholarly and playful ways questions of the nature of reading, and of literacy and narrative in new times,

with new technologies.

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